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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000146

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/HARDING

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/26/2017

TAGS: IS LE PGOV PREL PTER SY

SUBJECT: LEBANON: AOUN ADVISOR ADMITS ERRORS; CLAIMS THE
GENERAL STOPPED FURTHER VIOLENCE

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman. Reason: Section 1.4 (b)

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SUMMARY

¶1. (C) In a January 26 meeting, MP Ibrahim Kanaan, a senior Aounist advisor, admitted to emboff that Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) made serious errors of judgment on January 23, the date of a violent general strike in Beirut that resulted in three deaths and numerous casualties. Kanaan went to great lengths in attempting to put distance between FPM's objectives and those of other members of the anti-government March 8th alliance led by Hizballah. Insisting that Michel Aoun was committed to democracy and stability, Kanaan accused the Lebanese Forces (LF), their main adversary in Lebanon's fractured Christian community, for turning the "peaceful show of force" that Aoun had allegedly wanted into a violent series of confrontations. Kanaan earnestly asked if time remained to solve Lebanon's impasse through negotiation and suggested two confidence-building measures: March 14 would acknowledge Aoun's "key" role in ending Tuesday's violence, while Aoun would try to convince his March 8th allies to take down the tents in Riad Solh Square and, in effect, lift the siege of the Grand Serail. Kanaan acknowledged he did not actually have the authority from Aoun to commit to such an agreement, but assured us he would press the proposal with the general. End summary.

¶2. (C) MP Ibrahim Kanaan, who is considered an influential and moderate advisor to Michel Aoun, urgently requested a meeting with an Embassy officer following last Tuesday's clashes in Beirut. Emboff met with Kanaan on January 26 at his heavily-guarded residence in Rabieh, a few miles north of Beirut. Kanaan, normally a relaxed interlocutor who is frequently used as FPM's public spokesperson, was visibly anxious throughout the discussion. When emboff delivered the Ambassador's message that Tuesday's violence had gone far beyond the pale, the committed Aounist threw up his hands and exclaimed, "We know, we know -- there were incredibly bad errors in judgment."

¶3. (C) Kanaan asked that we recognize that Aoun's political objectives in seeking the resignation of the Siniiora government were considerably different from Suleiman Franjieh (pro-Syrian Maronite leader of the Marada party) and Hassan Nasrallah. He said he realized that Tuesday's events had probably convinced Washington that General Aoun was now deep inside the pro-Syrian camp, but insisted that was not the case. In an argument heard many times before, Kanaan

maintained that Aoun was simply trying to protect Lebanon's beleaguered Christian minority, which was being systematically excluded from power by a powerful Sunni clique that controlled both the cabinet and parliament. He argued that Aoun realizes that both Hizballah and Marada are "partly driven" by a Syrian agenda, but had "reluctantly" come to the decision last year that an alliance with his March 8th counterparts was tactically necessary.

¶4. (C) According to Kanaan's rendering of Tuesday's events, FPM's senior leadership was stunned by the violence that quickly unfolded in Beirut's streets. By late afternoon, when international news channels were broadcasting images of Beirut under a pall of black smoke set by Aounist fires, Kanaan said Aoun "slowly realized" his serious miscalculation. But he then employed an often-used FPM charge and also blamed the violent reaction taken by supporters of Aoun's principal adversary, Samir Geagea. Even when the sophistry of this argument was pointed out, Kanaan continued to insist that Geagea's Lebanese Forces also deserved considerable blame.

¶5. (C) Eventually acknowledging that Tuesday's events undermined his explanations, Kanaan transitioned to "sincere" assurances that Aoun would henceforth repudiate violent demonstrations and would never again employ burning barricades to advance his aims. He insisted that it was Michel Aoun, as represented by his (apparent) pro-Syrian advisor Gibran Bassil, who had actually been the one who convinced Nasrallah and Franjeh, at a strategy conference held late Tuesday night, to call off any further days of protest. When informed that version of the meeting was difficult to believe given the fiery statements Aoun had delivered against the Siniora government, Kanaan conceded it was indeed at variance with Aoun's public persona, but was

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nevertheless true.

A SUGGESTED -- BUT UNAUTHORIZED --
STEP BACK FROM CONFRONTATION

¶6. (C) Expressing his conviction that reason could still prevail, Kanaan suggested a pair of reciprocal confidence-building measures, but also admitted they had not been authorized. In his opinion, he believed that some of the considerable mutual distrust that existed between the Siniora government and the Aounists could be reduced if: the Siniora government recognized the central role Aoun had (purportedly) played in bringing and end to the general strike, and in return, the general would attempt to persuade his March 8th allies to call off the "siege" of the Grand Serail by ending the continuous March 8th presence in Riad Solh Square and on the approaches to the prime minister's offices.

¶7. (C) MP Kanaan, who is usually one of the more reasonable and less dogmatic of the high-level Aounists, conceded it would be exceedingly difficult for Aoun to convince Nasrallah to take such an action, but said that one had to start somewhere. To do nothing, he argued, would simply allow the dangerous momentum of confrontation to accelerate. Kanaan said he could imagine the skeptical reaction of Washington, but earnestly requested that communication with Michel Aoun be maintained. (Comment: Kanaan and Mohamed Chatah serve as an intermittent channel between PM Siniora and Michel Aoun. In a 1/27 meeting with Chatah covered septel, the Ambassador encouraged Chatah to use the need to brief Aoun on Paris III to reach out to Kanaan and test his proposition. Chatah promised to do so. End comment.)

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